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The UK: Multi-level Elections in an Asymmetrical State

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14.1. Introduction

Multi-level government arrived late in the UK, with the exception of Northern Ireland. In the case of the latter, a system of devolved government had been in place since the partition of the island of Ireland in 1921, until the imposition of direct rule in 1972 amid violent sectarian conflict. Until devolution was introduced in Scotland and Wales in 1999, and reintroduced in Northern Ireland, the UK was one of the most centralized states in Europe. Yet, it always maintained a degree of territorial heterogeneity. In identity terms, a British nation co-existed with the nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and only in the latter instance did this prove problematic. Each of these territories also enjoyed – to varying degrees – institutional distinctiveness, helping to nurture the development of distinctive systems of party politics and electoral behavior. This distinctiveness has been reinforced by devolution and multi-level government.

This chapter will contribute towards the evaluation of the independent variables set out in chapter 1 by examining their effect on voting patterns across the UK's territorial units. There are some similarities among the units within the UK case. Each of the three devolved territories has non-statewide parties, many of whom advance a regionalist agenda. They each also have strong and distinctive territorial identities, which sometimes complement and

sometimes compete with statewide national identities. These identities are nurtured within distinctive institutions and civil societies. These features have engendered important territorial political cleavages in each case which can heighten the stakes invested in devolved elections for parties, the media and voters. There is variation across the devolved territories here, but this is more in the degree than in the form of the territorial cleavage. Greater variation is evident if we include London as a devolved territory; regionalist parties do not operate in London, and although the statewide parties may ‘play the London card’, this is not manifest in demands for greater political autonomy. The asymmetrical nature of multi-level government in the UK has generated moderate variation in the levels of regional autonomy. Autonomy in Scotland and Northern Ireland is higher than in Wales, but the National Assembly for Wales enjoys considerably more autonomy than the London Assembly, and has increased its legislative autonomy in recent years. We should thus expect second-order effects to be heightened in London Assembly elections and to a diminishing extent in elections to the National Assembly for Wales, and less apparent in devolved contests in Scotland and (to the extent that they can be measured here at all) in Northern Ireland. Examining only regional elections in the UK would only give a partial insight into territorial party politics, which was evident in the UK long before the establishment of multi-level government. We will thus also consider patterns of voting behavior in Westminster elections in the different nations and regions of the UK, including within England.

This chapter is divided into four sections. First, it sets out the nature of multi-level government in the United Kingdom, highlighting the asymmetry in the constitutional configuration of UK devolution and the modes by which parliamentarians are elected in each of the UK’s main political arenas. Second, it conducts an analysis of the degree of congruence and incongruence in vote shares for parties competing in statewide and regional electoral arenas. Third, it examines two key features associated with second-order elections theory:

electoral turnout, and party losses and gains between state and sub-state elections. Finally, it considers the extent to which devolution has led to a regionalization of the vote, in light of the heightened presence and success of non-statewide parties and the profound incongruence in the political composition of state and regional government which has emerged in recent years. The chapter concludes by assessing the variations within the UK case, which in part provide some support for the assumptions of a more nuanced application of second-order elections theory.

14.2. Regional government and regional elections

Until devolution was introduced to Scotland and Wales in 1999, and re-introduced to Northern Ireland in 1998, the UK was a highly centralized state. This centralization took the form of concentrating legislative power in Westminster and governing power in Whitehall. Yet, although the centralization of legislative power was complete, the centralization of governing power never was. Throughout the twentieth century, the territorial ministries of state, first in Scotland and later in Wales, gradually developed more administrative autonomy and responsibility for implementing a wide range of public policy and law. In Scotland in particular, political union had coincided with the retention of institutional distinctiveness. This was initially embodied within a distinctive legal system, church, education system and local government. From the late 19th century, the Scottish Office and the post of Scottish Secretary (later Secretary of State for Scotland), in spite of being offices of central government, assumed the symbolic significance of representing Scotland's national distinctiveness within the UK (Mitchell, 2003). Thus, long before devolution, Scotland arguably had a distinctive political system (Kellas, 1989; Paterson, 1994) or at least a distinctive dimension to politics (Midwinter, et al., 1991). Administrative devolution in Wales developed later, and with less

scope, when a territorial office for Wales was set up in 1964. It, too, served to underline Welsh distinctiveness in the UK (Bogdanor, 1979; Bradbury, 1998; Mitchell, 2009). As such, to characterize the UK as a unitary state prior to 1999 would be misleading; Mitchell suggested that it should be more appropriately characterized as a 'state of unions', created by a series of political unions, each with its own characteristics, between England and the other territories of the UK (Mitchell, 2009).

These institutional developments help to explain the evolution of the party system across the territories of the UK. The heterogeneity of the party system in the UK's four territories long predates devolution. Indeed, the increase in differential voting patterns in Westminster elections, discussed below, helped to fuel the demand for self-government in Scotland and Wales. These territories also include electorally significant regionalist parties, both of which made their presence felt from the late 1960s. As non-statewide parties competing in sub-state nations and regions which together return less than one fifth of MPs, their impact on overall results in statewide elections in the UK will likely always be marginal, but they have each had a significant impact on patterns of party competition in Scotland and Wales. Even in the context of a Westminster election, the share of the vote secured by each party within Scotland and Wales matters politically, and can shape the territorial development and integrity of the UK.

Northern Ireland is once again an exception, as its party system is wholly distinctive. Within a UK context, none of the parties competing in Northern Ireland field candidates in the rest of the UK, and so all can be classed as non-statewide parties; Sinn Féin is the only party to operate outside of Northern Ireland, contesting elections in the Irish Republic. Some Northern Irish parties have loose ties to British statewide parties, for example the Social Democratic and Labour Party has kinship with the British Labour Party and the Ulster Unionist Party has periodically had informal associations with the British Conservatives and developed a more

formal short-lived and entirely unsuccessful alliance with the Conservative Party in the General Election of 2010 (Smith, 2006; Tonge and Evans, 2010). But they remain organizationally distinctive, and the British parties do not compete in the province. Indeed, during the long years of devolution, before the onset of ‘the Troubles’ and the imposition of direct rule in 1972, Northern Ireland was treated with benign neglect and largely ignored by British political elites (Ruane and Todd, 1999; McGarry, 2001; Tonge, 2002). In the years which followed, political and sectarian violence emanating from Northern Ireland periodically dominated the UK political agenda. Consequently, the reintroduction of devolution to Northern Ireland in 1998 was never part of the same decentralizing process in response to nationalist challenges, as was seen in Scotland and to some extent in Wales. Rather, it was a key component of the Good Friday Agreement¹, and thus principally a tool of conflict resolution, influenced by broader devolutionary processes in the UK and Europe, but designed to bring an end to armed conflict and normalize politics in Northern Ireland (Mitchell and Wilford, 1999; Wilford, 2003; Ruane and Todd, 2007). The Northern Ireland Assembly was frequently suspended in its early years as the peace process faltered.

The institutional and political development of the UK has thus been highly asymmetric, and this asymmetry has survived into the era of devolution and multi-level government. UK devolution was never orchestrated centrally according to a grand federalist plan. Rather, it was adopted in a piecemeal fashion with plans developed to suit the demands emerging from each territory. Inasmuch as there was a plan, it was to ensure the future of the Union. Welsh devolution, it was hoped, would thus modify the potential territorial impact of Scottish devolution, and help to integrate Scotland into a reformed UK state. Devolution in Northern Ireland had entirely different motivations, to replace the politics of armed conflict with a ‘politics of civility’ (Aughey, 1999) and democratic governance.

Asymmetry is also evident in the devolution settlements designed for each territory. The powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament were largely based upon the administrative responsibilities that had previously been assigned to the Scottish Office, and included primary legislative power over a wide array of domestic policies, including health, education, rural affairs, the environment and economic development.¹ The Northern Ireland Assembly was granted a similar degree of devolution, with some additional powers, such as energy policy and social security, and some areas, like justice and policing, reserved initially to Westminster as a result of their political sensitivity in a Northern Irish context. Welsh devolution was always and remains more limited than the others, but has been the most subject to change since its introduction. Initially, the National Assembly for Wales lacked direct primary legislative powers, but devolution has been gradually strengthened since the Assembly's establishment and, following the referendum of 2011, the Assembly now has primary legislative powers in 20 designated fields, including health, education and training, and other broad areas of domestic policy (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2012).

Asymmetry in the UK is further marked by the absence of devolution in England, which represents around 85 per cent of the UK's population. The Labour government, elected in 1997, toyed with introducing elected regional government in England, but its already lukewarm commitment to English regional devolution evaporated following the heavy defeat of the devolution option in the North East referendum in 2004. England thus remains one of the most centralized nations in Europe, and the UK government and parliament also act as *de facto* English institutions when making decisions on those policy areas devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. England is not homogeneous, however, and its territorial heterogeneity has found expression in political behavior in national as well as municipal

¹ In fact, the legal competence of the Scottish Parliament is defined by what it can't do, that is, by those matters what are stipulated as being reserved to the Westminster parliament. These are set out in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act (1998), and include defence, foreign affairs, monetary and fiscal policy, asylum and immigration, the constitution, energy and social security. In effect, then, the Scottish Parliament has legislative competence over everything which is not explicitly reserved.

elections. Regional identity within England remains strong, although the boundaries of such identity communities do not map on neatly to institutional boundaries, making regional mobilization less likely.

London is in part an exception. It is sometimes considered as the fourth devolved territory, given the presence of an elected regional assembly. Previously, the Greater London Council (GLC) had enjoyed responsibility for the strategic governance of London from its formation in 1966 until its abolition by Mrs Thatcher's government in 1986 (the GLC had been among her government's most vociferous critics). London-wide government was restored in 1999 with the establishment of the Greater London Authority, comprised of a 25-member elected assembly and a directly elected mayor.² The London Mayor has executive power, mainly over transport and economic development. The principal role of the assembly is to scrutinize the mayor's office, hold it to account, and grant or withhold consent for key policy and financial decisions, including the budget (Sanford, 2004). The Greater London Authority may represent a larger population than any of the devolved territories, but as a form of 'devolution', it is on a different scale: although the mayor's office has symbolic significance and some important executive powers, the 25 MLAs have no legislative power and the assembly lacks the institutional strength and legitimacy of the elected bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There is, however, a growing awareness across England of a distinctive English national identity within the UK. This is gradually being articulated in a demand for an 'English dimension' to politics, but thus far has not resulted in a demand for English national or regional devolution (IPPR, 2012).

The heterogeneity and asymmetry of the UK is also evident in the multitude of electoral systems in use today. National elections are famously conducted using the simple plurality, 'first-past-the-post' system. This system has helped to prolong the dominance of two major parties, which since the early twentieth century have been the Conservative Party and the

Labour Party. The two party system has been challenged in the last 30 years by the emergence of the Liberal Democrats, although its future is far from certain; since entering coalition with the Conservatives in 2010, its support has decreased significantly.

The devolved assemblies and parliaments, by contrast, were established with degrees of proportionality built into their electoral system. A form of mixed member system - modeled on the system in place for the German *Bundestag* – was chosen for Scotland, Wales and London, largely as a result of political negotiation and compromise among the pro-devolution forces in the Scottish case. The Additional Member System (AMS) also had the advantage of retaining single member constituencies, a mark of conformity with the Westminster system and a reflection of the importance of constituency representation within British political culture.

These systems were not intended to achieve strict proportionality; the additional members were conceived as ‘top-up’ members to redress some of the disproportionality inherent in the constituency contests. The Scottish system comes closer to proportionality than the Welsh system. Of the 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) elected, 73 are elected by a simple plurality in single member districts, and the remaining 56 (seven MSPs in each of the eight regions) are drawn from the share of votes allocated, according to the d’Hondt formula, to parties or independent candidates standing on a separate regional ballot - a ratio of 57:43 in favor of constituencies (compared to the 50:50 ratio in Germany and New Zealand). The Welsh system operates in a similar way, but there are far fewer MSPs and less opportunity to achieve proportionality through the distribution of additional seats. Of the 60 Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) elected, 40 are elected in single member plurality districts, and a further 20 from regional lists across five electoral regions - a ratio of 60:40 in favor of constituencies. Of the 25 Members of the London Assembly (MLAs), 14 are elected in constituencies and 11 are drawn from London-wide party lists – a ratio of 56:44. The London

mayoral election uses the Supplementary Vote, allowing voters to cast a vote for their first and second preference candidates. If no candidate receives an absolute majority after the first vote is counted, all but the top two candidates are eliminated, and second preferences on the eliminated ballots which favor the remaining candidates are allocated until an eventual winner emerges (Rallings and Thrasher, 2000).

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) is used for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly (it is also in use in local and European elections in Northern Ireland, local and national elections in the Irish Republic and has been in place for Scottish local government elections since 2007). Although the original Northern Ireland parliament had used PR-STV in the 1920s, the introduction of the first-past-the-post system in Northern Ireland from 1929 until the suspension of the parliament in 1972 produced protestant unionist majorities which effectively disenfranchised the catholic minority. Proportional representation was thus an essential component of the new settlement. In the devolved elections held since 1998, 108 members are elected, six members in each of the 18 multi-member wards (which mapped on to the existing Westminster constituencies), using the 'Droop Quota' to determine the quota required for electoral success (Mitchell and Gillespie, 1999). Proportionality is also enshrined in the consociational, power-sharing arrangements for government formation, with ministerial portfolios allocated (via d'Hondt) to parties to reflect their electoral strength in the Assembly, and the two largest parties in each designation nominating the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (McGarry and O'Leary, 2004; Coakley, 2009).

Elections to the devolved parliaments and assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are held simultaneously³, but this does not produce a horizontal statewide campaign. Even in 2011 when devolved elections were combined with a UK-wide referendum on electoral reform, the focus of each of the devolved elections was intra-territorial, with the referendum being largely over-shadowed.⁴ The absence of a national component to the three devolved

elections may in part be a result of the absence of devolution in England, but it also reflects the presence of distinctive political cultures, communities and civil societies in each of the devolved territories. We might expect that the lack of a national campaign encompassing these devolved elections would also modify the extent to which regional elections in the three devolved territories would produce second-order effects. By contrast, elections to the London Assembly, which partially conform to the cycle for municipal elections in England⁵, have both London-focused – and Mayor-focused – campaigns alongside England-wide campaigns involving the leaders of the main governing and opposition parties at Westminster. As a result, we might expect second-order dynamics to be more evident in Londoners' voting patterns.

14.3. Congruence of the Vote

When we examine voting patterns in national and regional elections across the UK, signs of incongruence emerge. However, this incongruence was not created by political devolution; rather it foretold devolution, both reflecting and reinforcing demands for greater autonomy for the UK's sub-state nations.

These voting patterns are depicted in Figure 14.1. It illustrates patterns of congruence and incongruence in the vote between three pairs of election types: the national share of votes in Westminster elections against the Westminster vote within each region and nation (NN-NR - this latter measure includes Westminster voting within English regions); national patterns in Westminster elections vis-à-vis voting patterns in regional devolved elections (NN-RR); and vote shares in national elections in each nation/region against vote shares in devolved elections in these territories (NR-RR).

Considering the first of these (NN-NR), in the first two decades following the Second World War, voting patterns in Westminster elections in the nations and regions appear broadly in alignment with the national pattern when we look at general trends. This gave rise to the prevalent view among political scientists that the UK post-war political and party system was broadly homogeneous. Distinctive territorial identities remained, but they did not represent significant political cleavages (McAllister and Rose, 1984). Of course, Northern Ireland was always treated as an anomaly. The Ulster Unionist Party dominated Westminster and devolved elections in Northern Ireland, albeit while maintaining loose and often acrimonious relations with the UK Conservatives (Smith, 2006). But a closer examination of the data reveals signs of variation elsewhere too. In Wales, in particular, the Labour Party never received less than 56 per cent of the vote between 1945 and 1970 (HC Research Paper, 2008; Rallings and Thrasher, 2009). Even in Scotland, where voting patterns appeared to be closely aligned with those across England, the Conservatives competed (successfully) under the banner of the Scottish Unionist Party and maintained this distinctive identity until 1965 (Seawright, 1996; Mitchell, 1990).

[Figure 14.1 about here]

Contrasting the national pattern with voting behavior across the regions and nations of the UK, Figure 14.1 also reveals a steady rise in incongruence in Westminster voting patterns since the mid-1970s. This change was particularly evident in Scotland and Wales, following the electoral breakthrough of the Scottish National Party and *Plaid Cymru*, the party of Wales. However, even when support for these regionalist parties started to wane from the late 1970s until the late 1980s, Scotland and Wales remained distinctive, consistently recording higher shares of the vote for the Labour Party than that party received in the UK as a whole. Indeed,

that the Labour Party (aided by the simple plurality system) consistently secured majority representation in Scotland and Wales in the eighteen years (1979-97) of Conservative dominance of UK government gave rise to the view that there was a democratic deficit in the political system, and devolution was needed to give voice to the political preferences of voters in Scotland and Wales.

There were signs of divergence elsewhere too. The strength of support for the Conservatives in the South East of England and the South West of England marked these regions out as being somewhat distinctive from the rest of England. By contrast, the North East also appears modestly incongruent in its voting patterns, with many voters remaining loyal to the Labour Party through its barren years in the 1980s and early 1990s. Only in 1997, when the Blair government was first elected, does England appear homogeneous, and more in alignment with the rest of Britain.

Devolution may not have created incongruence, but it has helped to reinforce it, especially when we compare voter preferences for devolved elections with the national share of the vote in Westminster elections (Figure 14.1 - NN-RR). The high level of incongruence between UK elections and devolved elections suggests that electoral politics in the devolved territories are somewhat distinctive from electoral politics at the statewide level. This is largely a result of the presence of non-statewide parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the relative weight of these nations within the UK as a whole, which collectively make up just 16 per cent of the UK electorate. Non-statewide parties compete in Westminster elections too, but their share of the overall UK vote is always going to be minimal. For example, in October 1974, a high water mark for regionalist parties in their respective regional contexts, their joint share of the overall UK vote came to just 3.4 per cent (HC Research Paper, 2008; Rallings and Thrasher, 2009). In devolved elections, by contrast, they are real contenders for power.

For our purposes, it may be more illuminating to consider voting behavior for both Westminster and devolved elections within Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Figure 14.1: NR-RR). In Scotland and Wales, the main regionalist parties tend to perform better in devolved elections than in elections to the Westminster parliament. Conversely, the Labour Party, which is by some distance the dominant party in both of these regions in Westminster elections, performs less well in the devolved arena. Prior to the 2010 Westminster elections when Labour lost office, this might have been consistent with the expectations of second-order elections theory. However, in both Scotland and Wales, analysis of surveys of voting behavior and attitudinal data consistently found that those switching their allegiance from the Labour Party to Plaid Cymru or the SNP tended to be motivated to do so by issues and concerns specific to the devolved context, and not as a protest against the Labour government (Paterson, et al., 2001; Trystan, et al., 2003; Wyn Jones and Scully, 2006; Johns, et al., 2010; Curtice, et al., 2010). In Northern Ireland, there are no statewide parties, and so both devolved and Westminster elections are dominated by non-statewide parties. Thus, although there is an exceptionally high level of incongruence on the NN-RR figure in Northern Ireland, there is a high level of congruence when we assess election results for different electoral arenas within Northern Ireland.

Thus, second-order explanations thus appear incapable of accounting for these patterns in the congruence and incongruence of vote shares. The patterns we see at the aggregate level have to be understood within each regional context. This does not mean that features normally associated with second-order elections are not apparent in the UK; as we shall see momentarily, in some cases they are. Rather, the features we see are not always compatible with the assumptions of second-order elections theory, which attributes primacy to the national, first-order arena in shaping electoral behavior and outcomes in apparently subordinate electoral contests.

14.4. Second-order election effects

For regional elections to be second-order, we would expect them to differ from statewide ‘first-order’ elections in three respects: they would have lower turnout; if held in the middle of the term of office of the statewide government, they would produce an electoral bounce for the principal statewide opposition party; and we would expect smaller parties to record higher vote shares than they do in statewide or national elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; see also Reif, 1985; Hough and Jeffery, 2006; and the introduction to this volume). These features of second-order elections – a consequence of these elections having ‘less at stake’ for the electorate – are considered below in the UK context.

Second-order elections theory suggests that turnout would be lower in elections with less at stake, that is elections with less policy scope and less territorial distinctiveness. Applied to the UK context, we would expect lower turnout in all devolved elections as compared to UK electoral turnout, but we might anticipate that levels of participation in elections to the National Assembly for Wales and the London Assembly may be lower than elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly, given that the latter have greater policy responsibility than the former, thus raising the stakes.

Table 14.1 conforms to the expected pattern of consistently lower turnout in regional elections, with the lowest levels of turnout associated with elections to institutions with lower levels of regional authority. Turnout in the devolved elections since 1999 has been markedly lower than turnout in UK-wide general elections, with average turnout lowest in the elections in London Assembly, then in Wales, and moderately higher in Scotland, and higher still in Northern Ireland. Only in Northern Ireland is turnout at the national and regional level broadly in alignment.

Notably, the change in the devolution settlement in Wales, which according to the hypothesis set out in the introduction, would potentially heighten the stakes of elections to the National Assembly for Wales, has not produced an increase in turnout, although it may be too early for any changes to resonate. The highest levels of turnout are found in the region with the greatest level of autonomy, but higher turnout in Northern Ireland is unlikely to be a reflection of a higher level of governmental competence. It may nonetheless rest on an alternative calculation of the electoral stakes. Regardless of the electoral arena in which the contest is being held, the outcome of any election can shape both the relative peace within Northern Ireland, and its future relationship with both Britain and the Irish Republic. Indeed, the significant drop in turnout in both the 2011 Assembly elections and the Westminster election a year earlier may suggest a normalization of politics in Northern Ireland as devolution beds down.

[Table 14.1 about here]

The presence or absence of second-order effects is also measured in the vote shares of governing and opposition parties. Measured at the aggregate level, the assumption is that governing parties will fare less well in regional elections which are held in the middle of a national government's term of office, with the principal opposition party receiving an electoral bounce. Regional elections held in close proximity to - or simultaneous with - statewide elections are more likely to conform to the national pattern (Hough and Jeffery, 2006). A further expected outcome of second-order elections is higher levels of support for smaller parties; with less at stake, voters are assumed to be more willing to cast their votes for minor parties even though they may be unlikely to be serious contenders for government.

In the UK, elections to the devolved institutions have never been held on the same day as statewide general elections, nor are they likely to be (see endnote 4). Until 2011, the standard pattern was for elections to the devolved parliaments and assemblies to come two years after the UK-wide election, and thus fall firmly within the middle of the national electoral cycle. As discussed above, elections in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland are held on the same day, but with very little cross-referencing. The absence of devolution in the largest territory of the UK means that simultaneous devolved elections do not produce the nationalising effects that we see for the non-historic *autonomías comunidades* in Spain, for example. Furthermore, the prevalence of distinctive territorial cleavages in each case ensures that the systems of party competition are seen in isolation from one another.

Figure 14.2 reveals a striking picture. In every devolved election since 1999 in which statewide parties compete (that is all except Northern Ireland), the parties of government at the national level have suffered significant losses in their share of the vote in those devolved elections in which they compete. A closer look at the data also points to an interesting outcome of the most recent elections. In the 2011 devolved elections in Scotland and Wales, held just one year after the UK general election, there appeared to be second-order effects at play. However, the leading party of government, the Conservatives, was not the one to suffer; its share of the vote in Scotland fell a little, albeit from already low depths, while in Wales, the party made gains. Rather, the Liberal Democrats, the junior partner in the UK coalition government, suffered significant losses in both Scotland and Wales. It seems that the voters used the early opportunity afforded by the devolved elections to pass judgment on the Liberal Democrats decision to compromise electoral promises to go into government with the Conservatives. The data for 2012 - the first London elections to be held since the 2010 Westminster elections - conformed more closely to the expected pattern in a second-order election. While the Conservative mayor was re-elected, his party fared less well in the

Assembly elections. Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats saw their vote share fall by almost five per cent, while the main national opposition party, the Labour Party, saw its vote share increase by some 14 per cent.

[Figure 14.2 about here]

A third feature of second-order elections is the share of support for minor parties. The devolved elections have provided greater opportunities for smaller parties and independent candidates to make an electoral impact. In the 2003 devolved election in Scotland, the Scottish Green Party and the Scottish Socialist Party (both non-statewide and regionalist parties) each secured just under seven per cent of the regional list vote, and gained official party status in parliament. However, although they have consistently gained representation, the level of success achieved in 2003 has yet to be repeated and it is impossible to attribute it to a perception of there being 'less at stake' in competence terms. Two other factors offer equally plausible explanations. First, each of the devolved territories operates a form of proportional representation, as discussed above. PR systems routinely nurture multi-party politics, providing greater opportunities for minority parties to make gains. Second, smaller parties tend to be crowded out of elections which are deemed to be close contests. This offers a further alternative perspective of what is at stake – if the outcome seems certain regardless of how electors cast their vote, they may judge that there is little to lose by voting for a minority party with little chance of victory. This certainly helps to explain the increased share for minority parties in Scotland in 2003, as well as their poorer performance in the subsequent elections.

14.5. Regionalization of the Vote

The introduction of devolution provided an opportunity to give institutional expression to the territorial heterogeneity in party competition and voter preferences. Coupled with the institutional features of the devolved parliaments, especially the various forms of proportional representation, devolution has strengthened regionalized electoral behavior, at times producing variation in the composition of government across the UK, and giving a platform to non-statewide parties to advance their territorial goals.

Multi-level elections can produce different and potentially competing government constellations within distinctive governmental tiers. This can have a significant effect on managing the relationships between the statewide government and sub-state regional governments, affecting communication, policy co-ordination, the capacity for joint decision making and the capacity of regional governments to access and influence the statewide government and bureaucracy. The history of multi-level government in the UK has produced mainly degrees of incongruence in central and regional government composition; only Wales has had periods of full congruence between the Welsh Assembly Government and the UK Government. Northern Ireland's distinctive party system and consociational government ensures permanent incongruence between the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government. Scotland experienced predominant congruence between 1999 and 2007, and has experienced full incongruence thereafter.

[Table 14.2 about here]

The nuances and dynamics of these relationships are better captured by the descriptive picture of Table 14.2 than an aggregate statistical measure. The prevalence of incongruence after the 2007 devolved elections was also accompanied by the presence of regionalist parties in

government: the Scottish National Party formed a single party government; *Plaid Cymru* entered a coalition of the two main parties in Wales; and *Sinn Féin* emerged as the second largest party in Northern Ireland, thus sharing the most senior ministerial positions with the Democratic Unionist Party, the more radical of the main protestant unionists parties. The presence of regionalist parties – beyond the fact of incongruence this produces – helps to shape the intergovernmental agenda, for example, by giving prominence to issues of constitutional autonomy.

Non-statewide parties are described here as those parties which operate only at the sub-state level. Many of these have the pursuit of greater political autonomy for the nations and regions they represent as a core objective. The Scottish National Party and *Plaid Cymru* represent the main, though not the only, non-statewide parties in Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland is once again somewhat more complex, as those non-statewide parties we might characterise as regionalist parties – *Sinn Féin* and the Social Democratic and Labour Party – ultimately seek the reunification of the island of Ireland, while the other main non-statewide parties are determined to maintain union with the rest of the UK.

[Figure 14.3]

In their comparative study of political behavior in European regions in the early 1990s, Hearl and Budge found that support for regionalist parties was highly correlated with the degree of distinctiveness of regional voting (Hearl and Budge, 1996). Inasmuch as the UK fitted this pattern then, this is arguably even more the case today. Figure 14.3 reveals that non-statewide parties play a significant role in UK politics in both statewide and regional electoral competition. Their electoral impact has been particularly evident since the early 1970s, and in the case of Scotland and Wales, the electoral breakthrough of the SNP and *Plaid Cymru* has

arguably been the principal driver of enhanced regional autonomy. It is also evident, however, that their share of the vote is higher in elections to the devolved institutions.

Although one might be tempted to conclude that this tendency to lend greater support to non-statewide parties in devolved elections reflects the lower stakes invested in these contests, this explanation is unconvincing. First, the variation we might expect to see between the devolved territories as a result of different degrees of political autonomy (and thus of the presumed stakes) is not apparent. Indeed, non-statewide regionalist parties in Scotland and Northern Ireland record, on average, higher shares of the vote than in Wales, where the stakes may be deemed to be lower as a result of lower levels of institutional autonomy. Second, there are arguably more plausible explanations. Devolved elections in Scotland and Wales are dominated by the dynamics of the party system in the devolved arena and, to date, the main competition in these contests has been between the Labour Party and the main regionalist party, regardless of whether the former is in government or opposition at the UK level. Moreover, these regionalist parties are evidently more serious contenders for government in devolved elections, increasing their likelihood of electoral success. These factors have little relationship with the assumptions of second-order theory; rather, it suggests that regional electoral competition plays to a different set of rules (Lineira, 2011).

14.6. Discussion

This chapter has assessed some of the assumptions of second-order election theory and its implications for understanding multi-level electoral competition in the UK. According to this theoretical perspective, regional elections would fall into the category of electoral competition which has less at stake, freeing voters to use the occasions to experiment with smaller parties, or to use the occasion to pass judgment on state-level concerns. More nuanced applications of

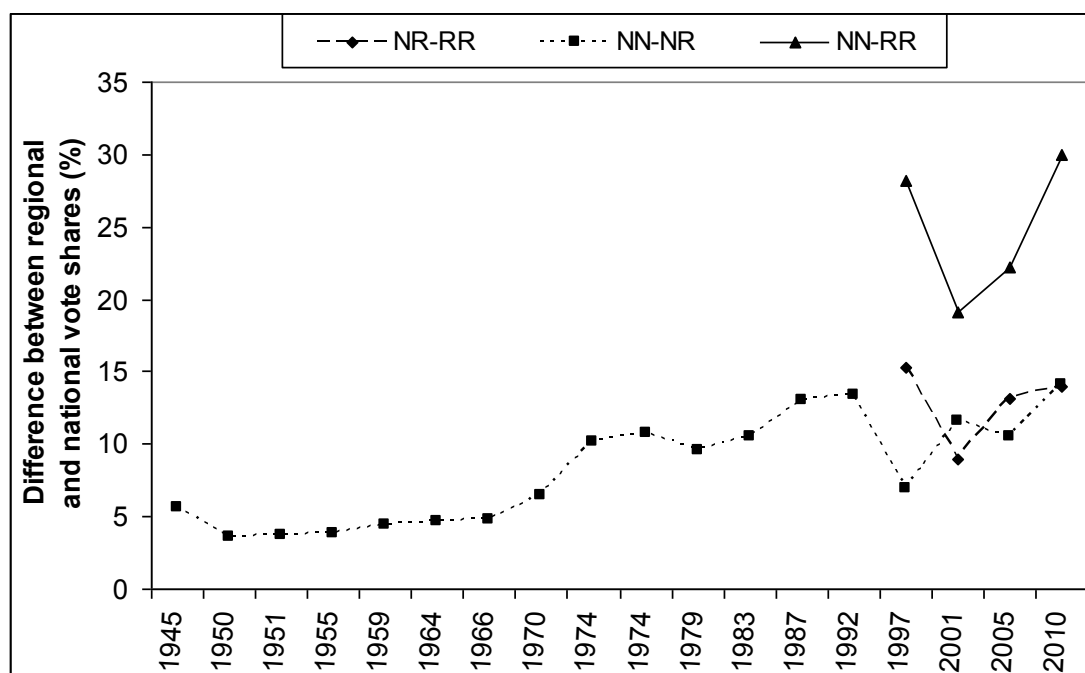
this perspective at the regional level have underlined that judgments about what is at stake may vary considerably between different regional electoral arenas, dependent upon the relative strength of the institutions to which voters are electing their representatives (Henderson and McEwen, 2010; Lineira, 2011; see also the introduction of this volume). Some regional governments have considerable decision-making autonomy, implying that election outcomes in these cases may have rather a lot at stake. Judgments of the ‘stakes’ at play may also go beyond institutional authority, with implications for constitutional futures. Subjective assessments of the importance of elections and institutions may also matter – for example, those who feel a strong sense of attachment to their region may invest a stake in the contest to decide who will represent the region, regardless of the level of institutional autonomy that region enjoys.

The relatively recent experience of multi-level government in the United Kingdom, and its profound asymmetry, may limit the extent to which it is comparable with other countries. The exclusion of by far the largest territory of the state from the system of devolution is especially notable. The absence of statewide parties, the history of sectarian conflict, the power-sharing arrangements in government, the cross-border relationship with the Irish Republic, as well as the stop-start nature of devolution, all serve to underline Northern Ireland’s uniqueness within the UK. However, variation within the UK presents an opportunity to test some of the assumptions of the second-order perspective more closely. If we include the London Assembly alongside the other devolved assemblies, they range from weak (London Assembly) to modest (National Assembly for Wales) to strong (the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly). In the first three cases, one finds similar variation in the strength of territorial identity (identity issues are somewhat more complex in Northern Ireland and cannot be considered on an ordinal scale). We should then expect to find more ‘second-orderness’ in London and Wales than in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The data does indeed suggest this, at least in part. The predicted pattern was evident when we examined electoral turnout in statewide and regional elections. Those institutions with the highest levels of institutional autonomy have higher levels of turnout in regional elections when compared to weaker regional authorities. In both Scotland and Northern Ireland, regional (and often statewide) elections are also often associated with debates on constitutional futures, potentially heightening the stakes and fostering higher turnout. Only in Northern Ireland has turnout in regional elections been on a par with or exceeded turnout in statewide elections, and the latter only occurred in the first election to the new assembly in 1998.

Second-order assumptions regarding the cycle of multi-level elections are only partly borne out. In Scotland, Wales and London, the parties of statewide government have taken an electoral hit in subsequent regional elections. However, only in London can we identify an electoral bounce for the principal statewide opposition party. The nature of electoral and party competition in Scotland and Wales suggests that the relative fortunes of the main parties are determined more by intra-territorial dynamics, including the parties' performance within the devolved context and the heightened opportunities devolved elections provide for regionalist parties. The performance of the statewide governing party, while not entirely absent from consideration in devolved election campaigns, is not the primary driver for their lower vote share.

Figure 14.1: Congruence between the national and regional vote



Notes: Shown are average dissimilarity scores. See the introduction for the formula. More details can be found in the UK country excel file.

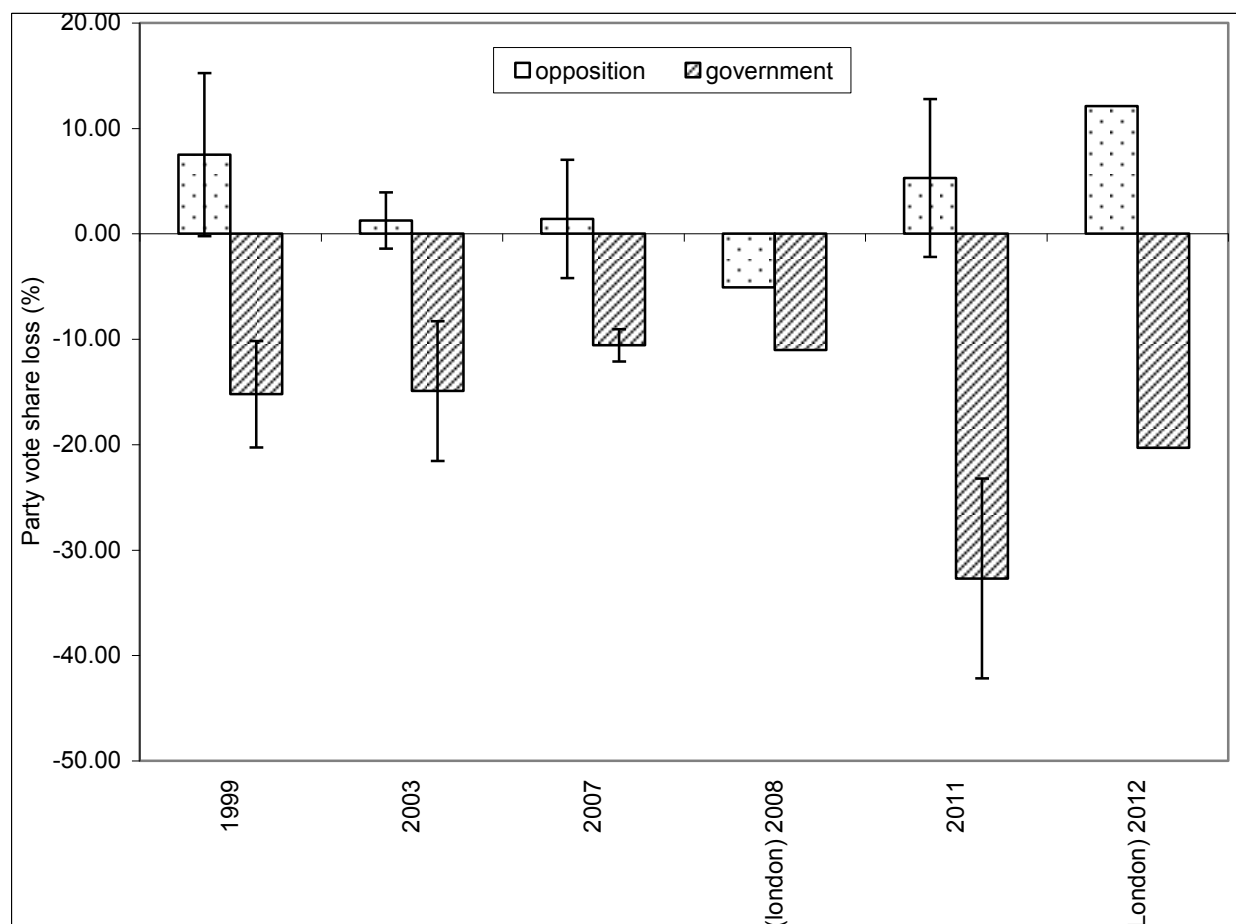
Table 14.1: Turnout in national and devolved elections since 1997

	Northern Ireland		Scotland		Wales		London	
	national	devolved	national	devolved	national	devolved	national	devolved
1997	67.1	70.0	71.3	58.8	73.5	46.4	67.6	34.3
2001	68.0	64.0	58.1	49.4	61.4	38.2	55.3	37.0
2005	62.9	62.9	60.8	53.9	62.6	43.5	57.8	45.2
2010	57.6	55.6	63.8	50.6	64.8	41.8	64.5	38.0
Average	63.9	63.1	63.5	53.2	65.6	42.5	61.3	38.6

Note: the left-hand column lists the year of the UK General Election. Data for devolved regions applies to each subsequent devolved election: Scotland and Wales: 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011; Northern Ireland: 1998, 2003, 2007, 2011; London: 2000; 2004; 2008; 2012.

Source: Electoral Commission; London Elects; Rallings and Thrasher, 2009.

Figure 14.2: Change in party vote shares between regional and previous national elections



Notes: The figure displays changes in total vote share for parties in national government and opposition. Shown are regional averages and their standard deviations. More details can be found in the UK country excel file.

Table 14.2: Government congruence and incongruence in the UK since devolution⁶

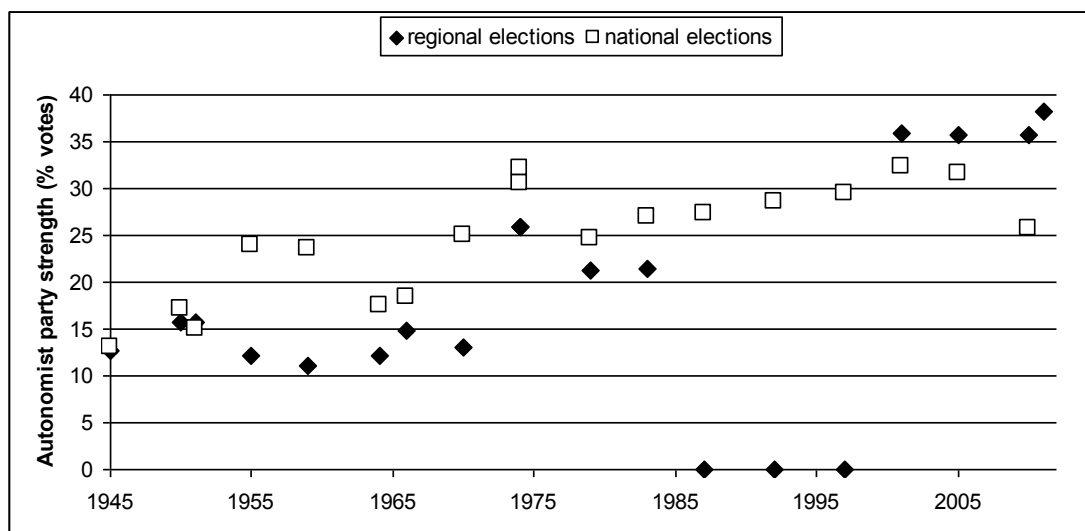
	Westminster	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland**
1997	Labour single party majority	Lab-Lib Dem coalition majority (1999-2003)	Lab minority (- Oct. 2000) Lab-Lib Dem coalition majority	Cross-party consociational govt, led by UUP & SDLP (1999-2002)
2001	Labour single party majority	Lab-Lib Dem coalition majority (2003-2007)	Lab single party 'majority' (-2005)*; Labour minority (2005-2007)	Suspension of devolution
2005	Labour single party majority	SNP single party minority (2007-2011)	Labour-Plaid Cymru coalition majority (2007-2011)	Cross-party consociational govt, led by DUP & Sinn Fein (2007-2011)
2010	Cons-Lib Dem coalition majority	SNP single party majority (2011-)	Labour single party 'minority'* (2011-)	Cross-party consociational govt, led by DUP & Sinn Fein (2007-2011)

* Labour won exactly half of the 60 seats in the National Assembly for Wales in 2003 and 2011. In 2003, an opposition AM was elected to the position of Presiding Officer, thus giving Labour a notional majority of 1. This ended when Peter Law, the AM for Blaenau Gwent, defected from Labour to become an Independent, in protest against the imposition of all-women shortlists for candidacies for the 2005 General Election. In 2011, a Labour AM was elected to the position of Presiding Officer, reducing Labour's share of seats to less than half.

** The Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended between February and May 2000; 24-hour suspensions in August 2001 and September 2001; and from October 2002. A transitional assembly was set up in October 2006, paving the way for the restoration of devolution in 2007 (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2011 http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/io/summary/new_summary.htm#7)

Source: Adapted from McEwen, et al., 2012a.

Figure 14.3: None statewide party strength in regional and national elections



Notes: Shown are average vote shares obtained by non-statewide parties in regional and national elections. More details can be found in the UK country excel file.

¹ The Good Friday Agreement was a major landmark in the peace process. It included a cross-party agreement by most political parties in Northern Ireland (excluding the Democratic Unionist Party, though they came on board in subsequent agreements) and a shorter international legal agreement between the British and Irish governments, and was endorsed by the electorate in Northern Ireland (and indirectly in the Irish Republic). Its provisions included the re-establishment of devolution, with consociational government, British-Irish and

North-South intergovernmental councils, commitments to decommissioning and the transfer of further powers, and the principle of self-determination for the people of Northern Ireland, guaranteeing that re-unification would only take place with the explicit democratic consent of a majority in Northern Ireland.

² Elected mayors have been introduced sporadically in other parts of England too, but they have not been accompanied by an elected regional assembly and the mayor's office lacks the gravitas or symbolic significance of the London mayor (see Curtice, et al., 2008).

³ The exception is the first election to the Northern Ireland Assembly, which was held in 1998, a year earlier than the Scottish and Welsh elections.

⁴ The introduction of fixed-term parliaments for the House of Commons would have resulted in simultaneous Westminster and devolved elections in 2015, as the devolved institutions ordinarily have four year fixed terms. However, simultaneity has been purposefully avoided by exceptionally extending the devolved term to five years.

⁵ Although there is simultaneity of a sort in English municipal elections, the cycle is rather complex, with metropolitan, and some single tier and two-tier districts electing a third of councilors every four years, on four year terms; and county councils, parish councils, London boroughs and other single tier and two-tier district councils having whole council elections every four years. To add to the complexity, each type of authority has its own electoral cycle. In 2012, when the most recent London Assembly and Mayoral election was held, local elections were held across 128 local authorities in England, with separate local elections also taking place in Scotland and Wales.

⁶ London is not included in this table because elections to the London Assembly do not produce a government. Rather Executive authority in the Greater London Authority lies with the Mayor's office.